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ABSTRACT

Research on effective writing programs suggests that writing be taught in the context of a program that allows students to grow, learn, try, and try again, as they become proficient at the task of communicating. Three categories of behaviors facilitate this process: (1) teacher characteristics such as patience, understanding, interest, and high personal standards; (2) an environment that is supporting, flexible, and organized to provide a sense of community; and (3) learning opportunities which are varied, interesting, and relevant. Examples of these characteristics can be found in classrooms in the United Kingdom. The example of schools in the United Kingdom demonstrates that schools can and do integrate language arts, and in so doing, produce scholars who are highly literate, well-read, productive members of society. (A table listing characteristics of effective writing programs is included; 24 references are attached.) (RS)

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THE BRITISH APPROACH TO WRITING: A LOOK AT CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

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THE BRITISH APPROACH TO WRITING:
A LOOK AT CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

The classroom is relatively quiet. Bright morning light streams into the 200-year-old room. Bulletin boards and displays reflect the "farm" topic being studied this term. Half finished "moving" models of farm equipment rest on a table in the corner. A chart of farm words is prominently displayed. Empty containers for dairy products stand ready for examination and comparison. Dairy terms written on the blackboard (large or small cornets, ice lolly, ice cream flake) tickle the fancy of the observer. Stories about the class's trip to a modern dairy farm, beautifully illustrated with watercolor drawings of cows and farm buildings, are displayed, carefully matted, on one wall. Books about farms, on several reading levels, rest on shelves in the library center. Scales, gram weights, empty milk cartons, and calculators stand ready for use during "maths" time under a chart giving the following problems:

Problem 1: How much does the milk in a 3000 pint tanker truck weigh in grams?

Problem 2: If a tanker truck collected 85,544 grams of milk from a farm, how many pints of milk did it collect?

The quietness of the classroom is deceptive. The educational paraphernalia, displayed in every nook and corner, clearly demonstrates that learning for these pupils of Mrs. Prout's junior class is often busy, creative, fun, and exciting.

Today these eight and nine-year-old children, sitting four to a table, work intently on the task at hand. They have been instructed by their teacher to write a letter asking permission for the class to visit Cogges Farm, a working

turn-of- the-century farm in a near-by village. The form for the letter is on the board, but the content of the letter is purely their own.

St. Andrews First School
London Road,
Headington,
Oxford OX39ED
Date

Dear_____,

_____

_____

Yours sincerely,

Name

William squirms a bit as he labors over a word he does not know how to spell. Finally he raises his hand and asks the teacher how to spell "interested". She tells him to spell the word the way it sounds, which he does with some reluctance. She reminds him and the others that this letter should be written in their "rough" books first, then after corrections are made written on good clean paper using their best penmanship. This picture of a British classroom is a realistic one.

Since the early 1980's, I have spent a good deal of time visiting primary schools in the Oxfordshire region of England. The purpose of these visits has been to familiarize myself with the educational system of Great Britain, specifically in the area of reading and language arts instruction at the primary level. Armed with knowledge of the specific characteristics of the British system in general (flexibility of programs, limited local and national control, and autonomy of teachers) I wanted to view first-hand the British approach to literacy which uses thematic units or topics to integrate the language arts (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) with other subjects like maths, science, and aesthetics. Specifically, I wanted to

know how writing fits into the scheme of things in British classrooms.

Effective Environments for Writing Programs

To evaluate the environment found in British writing programs, I first had to decide for myself what type of environment seemed to nurture and support good writing programs. A review of the literature identified three primary categories that appear to effect the efficiency and effectiveness of writing programs. These categories are:

- attitude of the teacher including his/her knowledge of writing strategies and patience with beginning writers
- environment itself
- quality of the learning opportunities provided.

The factors which make up these categories are outlined below.

Insert Table One About Here

Attitude, Knowledge, Patience of the Teacher

For twenty years or more studies have been made of the relationship between teacher attitudes and behaviors and students' writing performance. A positive attitude which encourages students to write stands out clearly as a aide to good writing behavior (Burrows, 1966). Haden (1971) found that projecting a free and relaxed attitude and providing positive comments affected creative writing. This was supported by Lickteig (1981) who states that a teacher's attitude reflected in words and actions is the single most important ingredient in a successful composition program for children.

In addition to having a positive attitude, teachers must know how to teach writing and be able to monitor and adjust

instruction according to student's needs. Graves (1978) suggests that knowledge of learners' interests, learning problems, and personal struggles help teachers guide students through the writing process. Teachers must understand that not all students come to the process with the same strengths and weaknesses (Golden, 1980) and plan accordingly. According to Graves (1976) this may involve entirely different approaches for reactive students (those who write quickly and do not like to revise and edit) and reflective students (those who contemplate their work).

Patience is a third teacher attribute that must be considered. Britton (Evertts, 1970) in a conversation with other educators states that teachers must be able to wait for results. Graves (1878) proposes that this patience comes from a high personal standard of craftsmanship held by the teacher. He further suggests (Graves, 1983) that by possessing an artisan's view of the universe, a teacher sees information and material constantly evolving toward a state of excellence. Therefore, writing is never wrong, only unfinished. Teachers must wait, listen, and look for ways to help students control their writing (Graves, 1983). How the teacher feels about writing, her knowledge of students and the process, and her ability to wait for results are directly related to student writing performance.

Supportive Learning Environment

According to the literature, a second key category that relates to the effectiveness of writing programs is the learning environment itself. One component of an effective learning environment is as Lickteig (1981) suggests a warm supportive atmosphere where student can afford to take risks, experiment with ideas, and make mistakes. This rich trusting environment allows many opportunities for purposeful communication (Norton, 1980). Temple, Nathan, Burris, and Temple (1988) extend this description of an appropriate atmosphere for writing to contain: (a) a rich curriculum, (b) the use of praise, (c) enthusiasm and respect for student's work, (d) goal setting, and (e) presence of purposeful audience. If students do not take chances and experiment with writing, according to Graves (1981), it may be because they have received prior teaching which contained an over abundance of attention to mechanics at the expense of information; teaching which emphasized the finished

product rather than the process; or teaching that stressed taking risks but which in reality punished students for not performing up to the teachers expectations.

Lickteig (1981) also suggests that a creative environment is characterized by nooks, crannies, and corners which adapt to learners crawling in, under, and around in an attempt to find a quiet area for reflection, incubation, and inspiration. The room needs to be be predictable, with paper, pencils, staplers, writing folder storage, and places to put completed work, all carefully defined as to place and use (Graves, 1983). Schedules should be flexible (Britton, 1970; Sickteig, 1981) allowing adequate time for writing (Graves, 1978; Norton, 1980). The content of writing is greatly enhanced when an environment provides the student meaningful choices (Graves, 1975). If teachers are successful in establishing a warm and supportive environment, a sense of community is established where students feel free to share their own work and support each other. Graves (1978) found that teachers who are successful in developing this kind of supportive community are more successful in fostering student expression. It appears that a supportive learning environment includes more than teacher behavior, it also involves the physical environment itself.

Learning Opportunities

A third category that affects writing performance is the structure of the program itself, specifically, the types of activities and learning opportunities provided for the students.

Because writing is only one form of communication, activities that promote other forms of communication also improve writing. Moffett and Wagner (1976) state that experience is a foundation of reading and writing behavior. According to Britton (1972) reading and writing are closely related. Reading provides a source of experiences and ideas for writing. Writing provides a means of refining and extending the content of reading. Both aspects of language are enriched and developed by all types of learning experiences, those that are concrete and those that are vicarious (Golden, 1981). Oral reading by the teacher builds rapport between teacher and student and provides an enjoyable, enriching, and essential ingredient for a writing program (Lickteig, 1981). Activities such

as storytelling, music, painting, choral speaking, crafts of all sorts, movement, and dance also provide rich and varied opportunities for writing (Graves, 1978).

In good writing programs, the purposes for writing are well defined. Writing is not done as part of an artificial situation, but for reasons that are meaningful and appropriate. Golden (1980) suggests that the audiences students write for should be authentic not hypothetical. Writing letters to "real" people, writing books for each other, and writing stories for younger children are only three ways to make writing meaningful.

It appears from a review of the literature that there are characteristics of writing programs which indicate a level of excellence. In order to get a sense of genuine writing experiences in programs where these categories of characteristics might be present, I made the following observations of writing behavior in three British primary schools in Oxfordshire, England.

Writing in the British Primary School

As was mentioned earlier, I visited three primary schools in England with the purpose of identifying characteristics of environments that support good writing programs. The primary focus of the observations was to look for (a) teacher characteristics that relate to writing, (b) structure of the learning environment, and (c) the types of writing experiences provided for the pupils. The schools I visited were East Oxford Primary School, Eynsham County Primary School, and St. Andrews First School. A brief description of each of the schools is given below.

East Oxford Primary School, a small six-teacher school located in inner-city Oxford, is housed in a building built in the early 20th century. Pupils' from varied backgrounds and nationalities range in age from 5 to 11 years. Rooms are small with high ceilings. Each classroom opens onto a large common area that is used for school assemblies and physical education instruction. The lower and middle primary classrooms are arranged in interest centers. Each classroom contains a cooking area with a stove and running water; a reading corner with a

variety of children's books; and "beauty" areas for displaying pupil's art work and writing. Pupils sit at tables not desks. In the upper level classrooms more than half of each room is set aside for reading and listening activities, again pupil's work is displayed on all available walls.

The second school, Eynsham County Primary School, is located in a small community outside of Oxford. Ensham is a nine-teacher school with students 5-11 years of age. The school building is relatively modern with large windows overlooking the countryside. The open-concept building with few interior walls is designed in pods. Each pod contains a number of learning centers with small bays and a large central area. Special areas for art, science, sewing, housekeeping (Windy House) are found in the bays. The bays are also used for small group instruction and independent research activities. A feature of great pride to the head teacher, Mr. Keats, is the school's above-ground swimming pool. As at East Oxford, student work is displayed everywhere.

I visited the third school for a two-week period last summer. St. Andrews First School is a church affiliated school located in the Headington area of Oxford. This nine-teacher school is located in an upper-middle class area of the city and serves the families of professors at Oxford University. The building is older than the other two school buildings, approximately 200 years old, but provides a wealth of educational opportunities to the children in the area. The classrooms are self-contained. As a testament to the area's growth, a large two-room portable building stands in a corner of the playyard. The center corridor serves as the school library. A large hall doubles for school assemblies, gymnastic practices on cold and wet days, games, and dances. As in the other schools, color abounds.

As I observed the physical arrangement of each of the schools, I was acutely aware of the value placed on the writings of the pupils. Children's stories, descriptions, and letters (many of them beautifully illustrated) were everywhere. Writing was arranged on walls, bulletin boards, and in "beauty" centers. Pupil- written books were displayed along with published works in libraries and library corners of classrooms. How did the programs of the three schools stack up in light of the

characteristics of effective programs identified earlier? To answer this question, a deeper look at teacher behaviors, school environment, and learning opportunities was needed.

Teacher attitudes and behaviors related to writing

The effect of the teacher upon the writing behavior of students could only be judged indirectly. Teachers in all classrooms appeared to be open, warm, and understanding. A "child centered" program was visible in each classroom I visited. Teachers knew their pupils interests and needs very well. The vertical grouping of British Primary Schools lends itself to this type of understanding. In all three schools the pupils stayed with a teacher for more than one year. Because the schools were "neighborhood" schools, the teachers knew the child and his/her family. When parents brought their children to school and picked them up in the afternoon, they often stopped for a moment to visit informally with the teachers. Many of the mums volunteered to help teachers with classroom or administrative duties or simply listen to pupils read.

The given right to choose what, when, and how to teach (the autonomy of the British teacher) allowed each teacher to choose how he/she wanted to integrate writing with the other subject areas. British teachers are not only happy with this arrangement, they are fiercely protective of it. Teachers were free to choose the topic for each term and structure the curriculum around this theme. This meant that writing became an integral part of each day's work.

The understanding of each child's needs and the freedom to choose what to teach, helped the teachers differentiate instruction. Teachers were able to handle having each pupil reading and writing at a different level. They seemed to be able to tolerate a great deal of ambiguity, and were not at all distracted, when working with one student, by a multitude of other activities going on at the same time. In one lower-primary class at Ensham students were doing simple research in a bay on the topic of water; in another bay a mum was helping a group of pupils with stitchery; another group of students was working with a mum in the courtyard verifying their predictions about how much water one of the pupils would displace using a large rubbish bin, water, and the "chum" dressed in bathing

clothes; and, the teacher was listening to individual pupils read. This meant that some pupils could write while others were doing maths or art or read all at the same time. The teachers attitudes about writing could also be judged by the amount of children's writing displayed throughout the schools.

In a conversation with the headteacher of East Oxford Primary School, the characteristics he most desired in a teacher were the ability:

- to get along with others
- to be well organized, and
- to be a kind, outgoing and responsible person.

It is my opinion that his teachers and those at Eynsham and St. Andrews met these criteria.

Learning environment as related to writing

The environment in each of the schools fits Britton's concept of a good writing environment. Each classroom was full of things to do; things that have been done; things that are there to do; and materials with which to do things (Britton, 1970). This informal environment provided pupils with opportunities for making choices. Each classroom, regardless of the configuration of the school itself, was set up in interest centers. Pupils worked independently or in small groups. Teachers worked primarily with individual pupils. Movement between the centers was monitored informally. On very few occasions were all of the pupils engaged in the same task at the same time.

Because teachers were free to set their own schedules, writing could take up as much or as little time as the teacher felt necessary. There was no hurrying to get on to the next subject. What most teachers chose to offer their pupils was an integrated day with reading and writing carefully coordinated with science, mathematics, and creative activities, according to their interests and those of their pupils.

A warm supportive environment where pupils could take risks and make mistakes was demonstrated in maths and other subject areas as well as writing. Prediction was a key learning activity in all areas of instruction. Learning to predict when the trees would bud in the spring, how many liters a tanker of milk would hold, or what color red and blue would make when mixed together gave pupils the feeling that taking chances, making guesses, was an integral part of learning. They did not feel that their writing had to be correct the first time. They would have opportunities to change, modify, learn, as their writing developed. In writing, drafting in their "rough" books was an important early step in the writing process.

Learning opportunities related to writing

The types of learning activities provided in each of the schools I visited were similar in their content. The initial instructional sequence used was a simple one:

- to encourage pupils to dictate words to describe pictures that they had drawn
- to provide opportunities for pupils to trace over these words and sentences
- to give pupils a chance to copy the sentences under the teachers writing
- as soon as they were ready, pupils began to write independently one and two sentence stories.

At the lower-primary level writing was about self and the topic being studied Even at this level, they were beginning to use outside sources in their writing. Mechanics were taught informally through specific writing tasks, not as separate subjects. Teachers provided spelling words as needed. These words were written in word books for future use. In a classroom of younger children at Eynsham, pupils wrote their first drafts on unlined paper with a border around the edges. In the border they practiced their penmanship. This made even their first drafts not only functional, but attractive.

All writing was meant to be read by someone. In one classroom at East Oxford Primary the pupils were studying holidays (vacations) and were writing about their imagined stay in at specific hotels on the coast. Their stories were first written in rough draft form on unlined paper. Pictures of different hotels, cut from a magazines, were pasted at the top of the pages as a stimulus for the writing. The stories were then revised, edited, and made into a travel brochure to be shared with other classes as the entire school planned for an upcoming holiday.

Pupils even in the lowest infant classes published class books based upon the topic being studied. One class at St. Andrews published that year the following books:

- *This Is How We Made Bubbles*
- *This Is Our Book of Treasure Maps And Messages*
- *How To Escape From A Desert Island.*

The books were read over and over, shared with the headteacher and the vicar, and placed in the classroom's library.

In a junior class at Eynsham Primary, I discussed with a group of boys the steps they went through when they wrote. They told me about a school trip they had taken to Coatsworth Farm Park. After the trip they discussed the trip, read books about animals, wrote an essay, and drew pictures of their experiences. After they wrote about the trip (or anything else), they always read what they had written to see if it "sounded right". This concept of relating writing to meaning was a strong one that was found in each classroom visited. Pupils could ask the teacher for help with revising and editing if needed. Once their paper was in its final state, they copied it on "good" paper with pen and ink. Work was saved in folders and when the pupils were eight years of age they could make their own book of their work.

In all classrooms the connection between reading and writing was strong. Because the schools in Oxfordshire do not use pupil textbooks for maths, science, and other content subjects, trade books, resource books, newspapers, and

magazines not only serve as texts, they also provide the resources for writing. In reading, pupils read a wide variety of trade books as well as student books from reading schemes, such as *One, Two, Three and Away*. These books expose the pupils to a wealth of information to write about, and also expose them to vocabulary and sentence structure with which to do the task. They read to write and write to read. All writing is meant to to be read by someone. This relationship between writer and reader emphasizes to the pupils the need for correctness both in mechanics and thought.

Conclusion

The research on effective writing programs clearly outlines the type of environment in which writing can flurish. It suggests that writing be taught in the context of a program that allows students to grow, learn, try and try again, as they become proficient at the task of communicating. This paper has identified three categories of behaviors that appear to facilitate this process. These are:

- teacher characteristics such as patience, understanding, interest, high personal standards
- an environment that is supporting, flexible, and organized to provide a sense of community
- learning opportunities which are varied, interesting, and relevant.

Examples of these characteristics can be found in classrooms in Great Britain. These examples provided in this article are given to demonstrate that schools can and do integrate language arts, and in so doing, produce scholars who are highly literate, well-read, productive members of society.

As I move to an ever increasing awareness that writing must become "real" to students, I am reminded of the statement made by the Skin Horse in Margery Williams' *Velveteen Rabbit*:

> "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you.

> When a child loves you for a long, long time,
> not just to play with, but REALLY loves you,
> then you become Real." (p. 17)

This is not only true for toys it is also true for writing as well. The activity of writing should be loved and cherished by both teachers and students alike. It should be integrated into all parts of the instructional day, not just the last 15 minutes of the afternoon. If we want out students of today to be literate citizens of the 2000's, perhaps it is time to adopt the British approach to literacy and make writing "real" for our students.

Table One

Characteristics of Effective Environments for Writing Programs

Teacher Characteristics	Learning Environment	Learning Activities
Positive Teacher Attitudes (Burrow, 1966; Hayden, 1971; Lickteig, 1981)	Warm, Supportive Atmosphere Where Learners Can Take Risks (Lickteig, 1981; Nolan, 1980)	Varied Experiences (Moffett & Wagner, 1976; Golden, 1980; Britton, 1970; Furrir, 1973)
Knowledge Of Interests Of Learners (Graves, 1978)	Stimulating Environment With Nooks, Crannies, And Corners (Lickteig, 1981)	Varied Reading Opportunities (Britton, et. al., 1970; Golden, 1980; (Lickteig,1981)
Understanding of Learner's Needs (Golden, 1980)	Flexible Schedules (Evertts, 1970; Lickteig, 1981)	Integration Of Other Forms of Expression (Graves, 1978)
Interest in Intentions of Students (Britton, 1970)	Adequate Time For Writing (Graves, 1978; Norton, 1980)	Extensive Writing Experiences (Graves, 1978)
Able to Wait for Results (Britton,1970)	Respond To Content Not Mechanics (Graves, 1978)	Opportunities To Write For Different Audiences (Graves, 1978; 1980; Britton, 1970; Golden, 1980; Norton, 1980)
High Personal` Standards (Graves, 1978)	Informal Environment With Choices (Graves, 1975)	Writing For Variety Of Purposes (Britton, et. al., 1975)

Sense of Community (Graves, 1975)

Healthy Environment (Temple, et. al., 1988)

Colaborative Environment (Smith, 1982)

Surrounding Students With Good Literature Calkins, 1986)

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